PALGRAVE *Studies in Oral History*

IRAQ'S LAST JEWS

STORIES OF DAILY LIFE, UPHEAVAL, AND ESCAPE FROM MODERN BABYLON

Edited by TAMAR MORAD, DENNIS SHASHA, and ROBERT SHASHA

Palgrave Studies in Oral History

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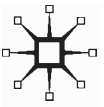

IRAQ'S LAST JEWS

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To the members and decendants of the proud and
productive community of Iraqi Jews.
Their heritage gives them valuable support
as they contribute to the lives of their adopted nations.

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Series Editors' Foreword

In another book in the Palgrave Studies in Oral History series, *Soldiers and Citizens*, an Assyrian Christian explains how his group in the Iraqi town of Dora was threatened with death if they didn't convert to Islam or pay a special tax or abandon their homes and leave within 24 hours. He remarked, "I heard there was talk of doing to the Christians what they did to the Jewish in the 1940s."[1] The year 1941 witnessed the Farhoud, a Nazi-inspired pogrom, which began a series of events that propelled a Jewish exodus from Iraq. Of the approximately 137,000 who resided in Iraq during the early 1940s, 124,000 had fled, most to Israel, by 1952. The relatively few left behind suffered as a result of the Six Day War in 1967 when Iraq restricted their movement, jobs, and opportunity to communicate in and outside of the country. Some suffered imprisonment and torture. Hence, the once vital and vibrant Iraqi Jewish community had all but disappeared from its homeland by the 1970s.

Oral histories have widely documented the Holocaust, but the stories recounted in this volume are less well-known and serve to expand our knowledge of Middle Eastern Jews outside of Israel. Oral history is particularly well suited to capture the drama and trials of this historical experience and to humanize the past condition of a community that exists in exile. With American attention focused upon Iraq as a consequence of two recent wars, public curiosity about that nation will benefit from these accounts.

Iraq's Last Jews joins a number of other volumes in this series that consider issues of world-historical significance. Whether it be the contemporary Iraq War or the decades-past Chinese Cultural Revolution, or any number of other topics, the series encourages the employment of oral history to investigate the memories of ordinary and extraordinary people in order to make sense of past and present.

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut

Linda Shopes
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

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Foreword

The American Sephardi Federation (ASF) is proud to sponsor the publication of this important book, a historic series of firsthand recollections from some of the last members of the now-vanished Babylonian Jewish community in Iraq—the oldest and longest-ever continuous community in the Jewish Diaspora. The Babylonian Jewish Diaspora was instrumental, through the writing of the Babylonian Talmud, in the development of Judaism as we know it today. Given all the important contributions of the Iraqi Jews throughout history, it is remarkable that the community is not even mentioned in conjunction with the remaking of Iraq today. These facts have not received the attention they deserve in the Jewish and general media. This book, together with the efforts of the ASF, is an attempt to rectify this.

Now the community is no more. But there are still strong bonds and organized community life within Iraqi Jewish circles in Israel, England, Canada, and the United States. Arabic and Judeo-Arabic are still spoken among the older emigrant parent generation and their delicious cuisine is preserved. But as fewer and fewer Iraqi-born Jews remain, the risk is great that these strong bonds and the knowledge of the traditions will disappear. This book is therefore an essential memory bank preserving the experience, traditions, and anecdotes in firsthand form from the last generation of Iraqi-born Jews.

As part of its effort to educate the public about the Jewish communities in the Arab world, the ASF, in 2006, announced a major new program series under the title *Historic Jewish Communities in the World of Islam* to present lectures, writings, and exhibitions and to secure records about the history, culture, and significant contributions of the old Jewish communities in the Islamic world. The first program, *Back to Babylon: 2,600 years of Jewish life in Iraq,* a four-day scholarly conference, took place in November, 2006, at the Center for Jewish History in New York. The ASF is very proud of this major new initiative in line with its mission to support all Sephardic communities and organizations in the United States, and to promote and preserve the rich spiritual, historical, cultural, and social traditions of all Sephardic communities as an integral part of Jewish heritage. This book is a vital part of these efforts.

David E. R. Dangoor
President

Note

1. Dr. Donny George Roukhanna in Carl Mirra, *Soldiers and Citizens: An Oral History of Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Battlefield to the Pentagon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Preface

Some 2,500 years after the first Jews established roots in Babylon, the once-vibrant and prosperous Jewish community of Iraq has disappeared. A community that numbered close to 140,000 in the late 1940s—and comprised fully one-third of Baghdad's population—consisted of a mere 20 when U.S. tanks rolled into the Iraqi capital in 2003. Today, fewer than ten Jews remain in Iraq.

Yet as late as the 1920s and 1930s, Iraqi Jews felt the heady potential of full equality in a secular society for the first time in their long history of subordination to Muslim rulers. From music to politics to commerce, Jews played a major role in Iraqi society and culture. For centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Babylon was the world's epicenter of Jewish life and religion—the place where the Babylonian Talmud was written and where rabbis from across the region and Europe came to learn from the most scholarly sages. But the community dissolved in the middle of the 20th century when pro-Nazi forces, Arab nationalism, and the formation of Israel led to violence against and a general sense of insecurity among Iraqi Jews, causing them to flee, mostly over the course of about a year and a half.

This book tells the story of that last generation, people who in many cases grew up with strong patriotic feelings but were always prepared for a future beyond Iraq's borders—just in case. The storytellers of these first-person accounts vary as widely as any group of Jews does, reflecting the breadth and texture of the community: wealthy businessmen and Communists, popular musicians and reformist writers, Iraqi patriots and early Zionists. Many had close friends among the Muslims and Christians of Iraq of whom they speak warmly. They tell the tales of a people with a love for their birth country that persisted even as they were forced to leave their homes.

The story of the final decades of the Jewish community in Iraq divides into three periods. First is the period before 1939 when the Jews in Iraq saw themselves as part of the Iraqi national fiber in government, commerce, and the arts. That ended verbally with the rise of Nazi influences and violently with the Farhoud, a pogrom against the Jews, in 1941. Second is the period between then and 1953 when Arab hostility toward the new state of Israel turned most Jews into Zionists and the vast majority of the community left. The final period records an Iraq that drifted

towards increasingly autocratic leadership, culminating in the sadistic dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, with the Jews often playing the role of scapegoat. Finally, the book closes with several moving retrospectives of the community.

These stories are sometimes funny, often tragic, touching, and insightful. Readers will find that the editors, in addition to recording descriptions of daily life, have also uncovered acts of heroism, adventure, and intrigue: from the undercover Israeli agents who helped orchestrate the mass emigration of Iraqi Jews to the young Jewish state at mid-century, to those who argued for the lives of their loved ones in the brutal prisons of Saddam Hussein. What has been compiled here, ultimately, is a book about quiet bravery in times of distress and a celebration of the possibility of peace.

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped us with this book. Judy Weinstein and Ariana Green conducted several interviews in addition to the interviews we did. Anat Rotem translated and transcribed the Hebrew interviews and transcribed many of the English ones as well, all with intelligence, alacrity, and precision. Elyse Seener and Pamela Giambalvo also transcribed some of the interviews. Nick Pikoulis and Gene Singer helped us greatly with the index. We are grateful also to Charles Jacobs, Jennifer Monsky, and Paula Blumenfeld-Gantz.

We would like to express our profound gratitude to Professor Shmuel Moreh of Hebrew University who wrote the introduction and suggested many important written sources to use. He possesses a deep well of knowledge about the Jews of Iraq and was ready and willing for us to draw from it whenever necessary. Likewise, Nissim Rejwan was a forthcoming source of information about the history of the community.

Mordechai Ben Porat, the director of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center (whose account appears in these pages), was of tremendous help in identifying interviewees, tracking them down, assisting us with basic historical facts and figures, and supplying us with photographs for the collection. Dedicated to the cause of disseminating the history of the Jews of Iraq, Ben Porat and his colleagues at the museum, most notably Einat Roth and Tami Avni-Huber, responded with care and accuracy to our numerous e-mails, phone calls, and faxes. Edwin Shuker in London put together a brilliant list of recommended interviewees in that city, and several others in Israel as well.

To be sure, this book could not have come to fruition without the willingness of dozens of Iraqi Jews to sit down and tell their stories patiently and in a forthcoming way—and then spend many additional hours with us via phone and e-mail editing their accounts for smoothness and cohesion. That gratitude applies not only to the 20 subjects who appear in the collection but also the 44 others in the United States, Canada, England, and Israel whose stories—all of them wonderful and often emotive—we were forced to omit due to lack of space.

Those storytellers include Mayer Attar, Carole Basri, Yvonne Cohen, Yair Dallal, Doreen Dangoor, Jack Dunnous, Nabil Fattal, Abraham Gabbay, Shoua Gigi, Herzl and Balfour Hakak, Benjamin Hayeem, Abraham Halima, Elias Hawa, Latif Hoory, Moshe Kahtan, Jamil Khazoom, Yeheskel Kojaman, David Khalastchy,

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And finally, we owe great thanks to our editor at Palgrave, Christopher Chappell, who worked tirelessly with us to make this book happen. He believed in our project from the very start, thus providing us with invaluable moral support. Erin Ivy at Palgrave and the production staff at Newgen Imaging Systems did a tremendous job copyediting and packaging the book.

Introduction: The Historical Context

Shmuel Moreh

Over its 2,500 years of existence, the Iraqi Jewish community formed a homogeneous group and was able to maintain communal identity, culture, and traditions throughout the centuries—all despite multiple conquests and political upheaval, war, and plagues. They were distinguished from their Iraqi brethren by their old Arabic dialect, Judeo-Arabic, which is replete with biblical Hebrew, biblical references, and words from Persian, Turkish, and Aramaic. They were set apart by their dress, their observation of Shabbat, holy days, and Kashrut, their unique cuisine, and, among many other things, a deep yearning for their spiritual Jerusalem and Zion. They purchased land and established yeshivot, religious houses of study, in Jerusalem and Hebron. Their social and religious life was based upon Talmudic and biblical rites, and they led an independent communal life headed by the Chief Rabbi (Hakham Bashi), who oversaw the community's educational system, religious court, and tax imposed upon Kosher meat.[1]

At the same time, they were well-integrated into the country in all aspects—politically, socially, and economically—and thoroughly Arabized in that their language, social traditions, and ways of life that were in many ways indistinguishable from those of their Arab compatriots.

For this reason, the disappearance of the Jewish community of Iraq is a particularly compelling story, and is distinguished from the Jewish exodus from other Arab lands by its precipitous nature.[2] The exodus also offers us a unique opportunity to understand the many political forces sweeping the Middle East in the twentieth century, including colonialism, Nazism, Arab nationalism, Communism, and Zionism, the history of all of which led to the disappearance of the Iraqi Jewish community.

Iraq, as it is called today, was the home of the ancient civilizations of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia. It was known by the Greeks as Mesopotamia—meaning, "the land between two rivers," the Tigris and Euphrates—and by the Jews as Babylonia. In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylonia (605–562 BC) invaded the Kingdom of Judah and brought back its Jewish king, Jehoiachin, with 10,000 of his subjects to Babylon. Eleven years later, after Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the First Temple, he brought forty thousand Jewish captives to his capital in Babylon, ninety kilometers south of modern-day Baghdad.[3] The Jewish captivity ended when the Persian King Cyrus II occupied Babylon in 538 BC and allowed the Jews to return back to their land. Some returned, but many stayed.[4]

Following the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, waves of exiled Jews traveled west and were assimilated among other tribes and nations. The Babylonian Jews—and those who migrated east from Eretz Yisrael—became the keepers of the Bible. Jewish culture flourished in Babylonia during the Persian regime (331–638). Jewish scholars compiled the Babylonian Talmud starting in 474 as the spiritual codex of Judaism, transforming Judaism into a spiritual and moral movement. Starting in the year 219, the academies of Sura and Nehardea were founded in Babylon. The heads of these academies were referred to later on as "Gaons" and were considered the highest authorities on religious matters in the Jewish world.[5]

In 570, Muhammad was born in Mecca and later on he emigrated in 622 to Medina, where Jews were active in commerce and industry. Shortly thereafter, Muslim armies conquered the regional armies and defeated the Persian Empire. The building of Baghdad during the Caliphate of al-Mansur in 762 established the most important center of culture, commerce, science, and arts in the western world. The Jews settled there, built new yeshivas, and attained important status, especially the Jewish Exilarch who was widely recognized as the descendant of King David and was the faith's highest authority.[6] The Exhilarch administered Jewish affairs for the community, deciding disputes and collecting taxes, and could impose bans, fines, imprisonment or flogging for punishment on religious matters.[7]

After the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258, centuries of chaos followed. As late as the beginning of the sixteenth century, the conflicts between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'i Safawis of Persia, in addition to repeated plagues, floods, and Bedouin invasions, devastated Iraq. Baghdad was diminished to the point that it became a marginal settlement of no political or commercial importance.[8]

The Ottoman rule (1534–1917) brought recovery and a degree of tolerance. Jews enjoyed relative freedom of religion, administrating their own affairs, especially in education. The Jews appointed a Nasi [prince] as their head, following the end of the institution of the Exilarch in 1401, by which time the heads of the yeshivot, or academies, wielded greater religious power. The Ottoman Sultan Murad IV was reputed to have had 10,000 Jewish officers in his government. During this time, wealthy Jewish men such as Heskel Ben Yusuf Gabbay in Baghdad and Istanbul and Sassoon Saleh

David in Baghdad served as treasurers for the Ottoman rulers.[9] Tolerance depended on local rulers. For example, Sultan's governor in Baghdad, Daoud Pasha (1817–1831), was considered one of the cruelest to the Jews and many Jews left the city during his rule. The Jewish population also declined after epidemics of cholera and typhoid.

After Pasha's death, the Jews began to build up influence in commerce and government. The position of Nasi was replaced by the Hakham Bashi in 1849. The prominent chief rabbis of the twentieth century were Hakham Ezra Dangoor, who had been the first rabbi of Burma and began one of the first printing presses in Iraq, and Hakham Sasson Khedouri.[10] The chief rabbi was also president of the community and was assisted by a lay council, a religious court, and a schools committee.[11]

The revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 adopted the slogan of *hurriya, 'adala, and musawat* (freedom, justice, and equality). Liberal Arab writers and politicians supported these principles. The common people, however, rejected those concepts as infringing upon the sovereignty of Islam and the benefits of the *dhimmi*—a status to which Christians and Jews had to conform in exchange for protection of their lives and property. *Dhimmi* status forbade Christians and Jews from testifying against Muslims, riding horses, owning a home whose building height was greater than those of Muslims, holding high office over Muslims, bearing arms, or drinking wine in public, and during the rule of strict and fanatic rulers they were required to wear a special emblem on their clothes—blue for Christians and yellow for Jews. The *dhimma* also entailed a special tax that, in some communities, constituted the majority of the tax revenue.[12]

In the nineteenth century, new opportunities for Jews in international commerce, banking, and administration arose as a result of a handful of important events: the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle school in 1864, one in a network of Alliance schools across the Middle East after their founding in Paris in 1860; the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869; the reforms of Midhat Pasha who was appointed a *wali* (governor) of Baghdad and Basra; the atmosphere of physical safety that prevailed in Iraq after Midhat Pasha defeated a Bedouin uprising and made it practical for the Jews to settle in cities in southern Iraq; the construction of the first railways in Iraq in 1903; and the declaration of equal rights for non-Muslim minorities in the Ottoman Constitution of 1908. Jews flourished financially and socially, and many left for India, China, and England to engage in international trade, as the Suez Canal and railroads facilitated trade across the vast British Empire.[13] Among those adventurers were Sir Elie Kadoorie (1865–1944), who went to Shanghai, and Sir Albert David Sassoon (1818–1896), who settled in India. Both established Jewish schools in Baghdad to help educate the wider Jewish population, and they were highly philanthropic in the countries in which they settled. Thousands of other Iraqi Jews followed them to their new outposts, and, as a result, prosperous Iraqi Jewish trading communities developed across Asia, from Calcutta and Bombay to Rangoon, Shanghai, and Kobe, Japan.[14]

The British alliance in 1916 with Sharif Hussein of Mecca and his Arab nationalist sons Faisal (1885–1933) and 'Abd Al-'Allah (1882–1951), against the Ottomans resulted in the creation of Iraq as a state following World War I. When the British entered Baghdad in 1917, Jews were the largest single group in the city's population, about 80,000 out of a total population of 202,000, or about one-third.[15] In 1921 Iraq was placed under the British mandate. Iraqis immediately revolted against their new occupiers so the British allowed them to form a self-governing kingdom under British advisory administration. After the expulsion of King Faisal bin Hussein from Damascus in 1920 by the French, a Jewish former member of the Ottoman Parliament, Sir Sassoon Hezkel, joined the Cairo Conference on the Middle East, headed by Winston Churchill. Hezkel backed the recommendation of crowning Faisal King of Iraq. As an acknowledgment of his abilities and loyalty, Heskel was appointed minister of finance in the first Iraqi government of King Faisal I, where he served for five years and continued to serve the country as a member of parliament until his death in 1932. Heskel greatly benefited the Iraqi economy by insisting on payment in gold rather than banknotes for Iraqi petrol in negotiations with the British Petroleum Company.[16] Faisal, who was educated in Istanbul and was influenced by the Young Turks' liberal ideology, genuinely seemed to believe in religious equality, even coining the dictum: "Religion is for God, the Fatherland is for everyone,"[17] giving priority to patriotism over Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic sentiments.

The 1920s and 1930s were considered a golden age for the Jews of Iraq, thanks in large part to the modernizing influence of the British and Faisal's friendly policies.[18] In 1919, he signed the Faisal-Weizmann agreement, declaring sympathy for the national aspirations of the Jews to create a homeland in Palestine. In that decade, Iraq was a small country of less than three and a half million (compared to 25 million today).[19] Two-thirds of the Jews lived in Baghdad; Basra had the second-largest concentration of Jews in the country and there were also Jewish communities in Mosul in the north, Kirkuk, Arbil, Sulaymaniyah, Khanaqin, Ba'qubah, Al Kut, Al Amarah, Al Hllah, and An Nasiriyah.[20] In this period, many Jews felt secure in Iraq and actively participated in the country's development.[21]

They built social clubs where they met often to listen to music, talk, and play cards, including in places such as the Laura Kadoorie Club, the Zawra' Club, and the Rashid.[22] Meir Elias founded the Meir Elias Jewish Hospital in 1910 and Sir Elie Kadoorie founded the Rimah Kadoorie Ḥospital for ophthalmology, named for his mother.[23] They contributed to the political system as representatives of parliament and as civil servants, to education and culture as writers and journalists and musicians, and to the commercial, industrial, and financial prosperity of the country as merchants and government officials. The most prominent Jews had good relations with the monarchy; for instance, when Sir Elie Kadoorie visited Baghdad from Shanghai, he was received by Faisal I, and when Faisal I visited London, he was a guest at Kadoorie's mansion. The community built dozens of schools with high

educational standards and an emphasis on foreign language, many of which were attended by Muslim and Christian pupils, though the majority of students were Jewish.[24] Half of the Iraqi students who received government scholarships to study abroad were Jewish.[25]

But the Jews' command of European languages and their international outlook also caused the Iraqi populace to identify them with Britain and France, the European occupying powers in the region.[26] And even during this peaceful period, other Iraqis decried the Jews' apparent control of the economy, generally superior social status, and the fact that they were disproportionately represented in government offices.[27]

In 1930, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty between the UK and British-controlled Iraq set out the basic terms of Iraq's nominal independence two years later at the termination of the British mandate and paved the way for Iraq's admittance to the League of Nations in 1932.[28] When Iraq gained its independence that year, many Iraqi ex-Ottoman officers considered the establishment of an Iraqi state a first step to a larger Pan-Arab state promised to the Hashemite dynasty for joining the British against the Ottomans during World War I. In addition, many Iraqi nationalists sought to restore the Caliphate to Arabs. Together, these groups formed an obstacle to a Western, secular political world order in Iraq and opposed any non-Arab or non-Muslim religious or ethnic activities.[29]

The secularists held the upper hand as long as Faisal I was king. Among them was the former military attaché to the Ottomans, the Jewish journalist and MP Salman Shinah who established the first Jewish magazine published in literary Arabic, *Al-Misbah-Ha 'Menorah* (The Lamp as a symbol of the Jewish people) (1924–1927), which had a strong Zionist orientation. Its co-editor, Anwar Shaul, also published the weekly magazine *Al-Hasid* (The Harvestman), between 1928 and 1939. Although Shinah became one of the defenders of Iraqi patriotism and Pan-Arab policy, his magazine was closed on the eve of World War II under pressure from Iraqi and Palestinian pro-Nazi nationalists.[30]

Many of these Jewish writers joined forces with liberal and leftist groups and wrote patriotic poems and short stories in praise of Iraq and in support of social and cultural reforms such as the liberation of women and inter-religious harmony. The Jewish headmaster of Mesouda Shemtob primary school, Shaul Haddad published the journal *Al-Burhan* (The Proof) to defend the Jewish minority against escalating Nazi activities. The poet Abraham Obadia wrote in praise of the Iraqi royal family. The economist Meir Basri, who joined the Iraqi Foreign Office, published articles on the Iraqi economy as well as poems and short stories on Iraq's social problems. Both Basri and the Jewish writer Ya'qub Balbul (Lev) edited the magazine *Al-Tijara* (The Commerce) (successively, 1938–1945, 1945–1951), published by the Chamber of Commerce in Baghdad.[31]

The Jews' success at unifying religious Zionism and Iraqi patriotism ended with the death of King Faisal I in 1933. The Iraqi government began to employ Sunni Palestinian teachers who had taken refuge in Iraq since the riots of 1929 in

Palestine and the massacre of the Jews of Hebron, and then after the revolt of 1936 in Palestine. Iraqi and Palestinian nationalists increased their pro-Nazi activities, forming the quasi-military organization Al-Futuwwa and the nationalist Al-Muthanna Club that incited violence against Jews.[32]

The resulting anti-Jewish, Pan-Arabic sentiment put an end to the government's tolerance of Jewish preeminence in commerce and influence in the political sphere, but especially of Zionist activities. Hebrew language lessons at Jewish schools were abolished in 1936 and quotas were imposed on Jews in institutions of higher learning. Jewish teachers from Palestine were expelled.[33]

Palestinian leaders were given hospitality, support, and the freedom of political activity in Iraq. They included the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who had been expelled from Jerusalem by the British; Jamal al-Husayni, head of the Arab Party; Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, a Nazi supporter who studied in Germany; Musa al-'Alami (1897–1984) who because of his involvement with the Arab rebellion, was dismissed from his position of the Palestine Government Advocate; and the Palestinian nationalist activist and poet Buhan al Din Al-Abbushi, who called for the people and the government of Iraq to expel or massacre the Iraq's Jews.[34]

The activities of these Palestinian nationalists and of Dr. Fritz Grobba, Germany's consul in Baghdad, led to the establishment of the pro-Nazi government headed by Rashid 'Aali al-Gilani in April, 1941. At the encouragement of the Mufti of Jerusalem and his entourage, Gilani instigated war with the British. The war was short. The British reoccupied Iraq to protect the flow of oil to the allies and out of fear of a broader German invasion to the Middle and Far East. The British victory over the Iraqi army at the end of May, 1941, created a brief vacuum of leadership and security in Iraq that led to the pogrom against the Jews of Baghdad known as the Farhoud (June 1–2, 1941) in which 130 Jews in Baghdad and 9 Jews outside Baghdad were killed and some 2,500 injured. During the Farhoud, the British army was camped outside Baghdad, abstaining from interfering under the pretext that the violence was an internal matter. Jews' houses and shops were looted, women and children were raped, and others were kidnapped and brutally killed. The Palestinians took active part in the incitements against the Jews.[35]

The Farhoud was a pivotal event in the history of the Jews in Iraq. It divided the Jewish community into three factions. First was the patriotic faction, which consisted of intellectuals, professionals, and wealthy merchants. They believed that their future lay in Iraq as loyal citizens. Their intellectual leaders included Anwar Shaul, Meir Basri, and Dr. Salman Darwish. Second were the Jewish Communists. They were convinced that the only solution to the problems faced by minorities in Iraq was a Communist revolution, which would bring freedom and equality to all. This group was well organized and enjoyed solidarity with and the appreciation of much of the Muslim Shiite majority and various ethnic and religious minorities throughout Iraq. Among their intellectual leaders were Yusuf Zilkha, Masroor Qatan, Yehezkel Kojman, Eliahir Hourie Sami Michael and Shimon Balas. Last

were the Zionists. Some of them, as reported in the narratives of Mordechai Ben Porat and Shlomo Hillel, already had relatives in the Holy Land at the time and were convinced that the only solution for the Jewish minority was the establishment of a national home in Eretz Yisrael [the biblical land of Israel] where they could live in security and equality.

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and especially after the humiliating defeat of the Arab armies, Arab nationalists in Iraq (and throughout the region) came to identify Jews with Zionism.[36] In July, two months after the outbreak of the War of Independence, Zionist affiliation was made a criminal offense in Iraq.[37] Later that year came the hanging of Shafiq 'Adas, a wealthy Jewish merchant from Basra accused of selling arms to the Zionists in Palestine. The event was another pivotal one for the community, as many Jews viewed his brutal death as a sign that the Jews had no future in Iraq. The government issued edicts removing Jews from many aspects of public life, cancelled the operating licenses of Jewish bankers, forced wealthy Jews to subsidize the Iraqi war effort in Palestine, and imposed restrictions on travel and the buying or selling of property.[38] For Jews, the Farhoud, the ongoing daily assaults and persecutions against them, and 'Adas' stunning murder gave rise to the spread of the Zionist underground movement in Iraq and its attempts to help Iraqi Jews escape to Israel as discussed in the narrative of Shlomo Sehayek.

In the 1940s, Jews began escaping from Iraq, first in small numbers via Syria and Lebanon to Palestine, then in large and growing numbers to Iran at the end of the decade, aided by Zionist emissaries who soon set their sights on transferring increasingly large numbers of Iraqi Jews to Israel. Frustrated and embarrassed by the illegal escapes, the Iraqi government issued the Citizenship Revocation Law in March, 1950, enabling Jews to revoke their citizenship and leave the country legally and permanently.[39] Virtually the entire Jewish community of some 140,000[40] (most of whom lived in Baghdad) on the eve of the exodus later named Operation Ezra and Nehemiah registered for this right, among them nearly all of Iraq's 20,000 Kurdish Jews, who lived in the north and were mostly poor, uneducated rural farmers.[41] After the registration process, the government enacted a second law in 1951 in which the properties of those who renounced their Iraqi nationality to leave Iraq had their assets frozen, rendering them penniless refugees in Israel. Most other Arab countries followed suit and expelled or persecuted their Jewish citizens.[42]

By the end of the period of the mass exodus, only about 6,000 Jews remained in Iraq. Those who stayed behind in those years—in many cases, wealthy Jews or those with great stature in Iraqi society—initially prospered once again, especially between 1958 and 1963, under the liberal government of Abd al-Karim Qassem (1914–1963), which overthrew the royal family, executing many of them including the young king Faisal II and the Crown Prince Abd al-Ilah.[43]

During Qassem's 1958 coup, Jews were falsely charged with having committed arson to petrol tanks on the outskirts of Russafa in Baghdad and anti-Semitic